

# Mixed Race Identities in a Small Country Town

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'Mixed race' individuals are the fastest-growing minority group in the UK and are predicted to be the largest by 2020 (Pinnock 2009). Moreover, the category of mixed race people has the youngest age profile of any ethnic group in the country, with young people six times more likely to be mixed race than adults (Manzi *et al.* 2008; Asthana and Smith 2009). Despite this growing demographic prominence in British society, however, relatively little academic literature has focused on mixed race identities, and less still on the relationship between mixed race identities and the environments in which they exist. In response to this deficit of anthropological enquiry into this subject, I chose to conduct my fieldwork with mixed race people born and raised in the East Sussex county town of Lewes, with the intention of better understanding how the physical, social and cultural environment of the town intersects with their identities.

Now, I cannot pretend that either the choice of my subjects or the choice of environment was coincidental. As a mixed race individual born and raised in Lewes, I was motivated to learn more about other people's experiences and how they compared to my own. As a result, the need to be reflexive of my own identity and experiences was paramount. Although providing an objective and all-encompassing analysis of mixed race experiences in Lewes was impossible, several recurring themes did emerge throughout the course of my fieldwork. This project may be understood as an attempt to articulate these themes.

Meeting other mixed race people raised in Lewes was relatively easy. I simply

contacted old friends and family friends online and asked them whether they wanted to be interviewed. Throughout the course of a week, I was able to conduct four interviews with mixed race people raised and educated in Lewes, three of whom now attend university in other parts of the country. Although I was initially concerned that my friendships with them might complicate my research, they conversely proved to be useful. Knowing the participants and holding interviews in the familiar surroundings of their own houses, meant that they seemed immediately at ease with me and were able to guide the conversations with frank accounts of their experiences in Lewes. Indeed, my own mixed race identity may have played a part in this, as their stories were often interspersed with remarks like "you probably had this too" or "don't you feel the same?" Although I wanted to focus the fieldwork very much on other people's experiences in Lewes, this level of shared identity allowed for honest and detailed conversations that I believe were of great utility to the project.

## What does it mean to be 'mixed race'?

As the idea of being mixed race is central to this project, it is first necessary to provide a definition of the term. The Oxford Dictionary defines mixed race as 'relating to people whose parents and ancestors are from different ethnic backgrounds' (Oxford 2018). However, given the inherently diverse nature of mixed race individuals, it is important not to view mixed race people as a homogenous ethnic or cultural group. Indeed, Peter Aspinall and Miri Song accurately observed that, in popular discourse, 'the mixed population is all too often lumped together as one entity' (2013: 12). I wanted to avoid this reductive understanding of what it means to be mixed race, instead focusing on differing individual experiences of those I interviewed in Lewes and how they understood their unique

identities within the social and material context of the town.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I spoke to people with a number of people with different ethnic backgrounds: Indian and English, Indian and Dutch, Sri Lankan, English and Irish, Indian-Fijian and English. All, however, considered themselves 'culturally English'. All had English as a first language and spoke in variants of Received Pronunciation or Estuary English, the two most common accents in the area. All wore 'western' clothes. I found it particularly notable that all came from 'middle-class' backgrounds, with parents in professional occupations, living in affluent leafy suburbs or the upscale town centre. Two attended the local independent school while the others went to a high-performing comprehensive on the edge of town.

### **Lewes**

Lewes is the county town of East Sussex, home to 17,863 people as of 2016 (citypopulation 2017). It is a historic and prosperous town and was recently named as the sixth best place to live in South East England by *The Sunday Times* (Davies 2018). Despite its proximity to Brighton and London, Lewes does not mirror the ethnic diversity of these larger urban areas. Figures from 2011 show that 95.5% of Lewes' population is white compared with the UK average of 87.2% in England and Wales (citypopulation 2017; Institute of Race Relations 2018). As most mixed race couples and children live in Britain's largest cities, the unusual demographic features of Lewes provide a unique backdrop for mixed race people to understand their own identities and their place in wider society (Manzi *et al.* 2008). This fieldwork is an attempt to understand the relationships between this unusual environment and the identities of mixed race people living within it.

### **'Different in a good way' – Visibility and Mixed Race Identity in Lewes**

"Lewes is so white!" said Annabelle, a 21 year-old student of English and Indian-Fijian descent, as we drank tea, sprawled across her sofa. Indeed, every single person I interviewed expressed similar observations. Although I initially thought that being part of such a small minority of non-white people in the town may lead to feelings of social isolation, many of the participants soon contradicted this. Instead, it appeared that they used their visibility and minority status to gain social acceptance, popularity and respect from their friends.

Jehan, a 21 year-old student of Indian and Dutch descent, told me how he frequently used to draw on his Indian heritage in his social interactions with his friends at school. "I used to sometimes put on this exaggerated Indian accent when I spoke to my friends", he said. "When they borrowed my belongings, I'd say things like 'that will cost you 20 rupees'". Jehan's voice bobbed up and down as he said this in an exaggerated Indian accent and he smiled, as if to acknowledge the ridiculousness of his act. However, he said that drawing attention to his Indian heritage in this way produced a positive response among his peers. By drawing attention to his visible ethnic differences and background, Jehan said that he became known for his 'good banter' in his social group, something which gave him a feeling of popularity in school.

Ned, a 19-year-old of Indian and English heritage also recounted how his visible difference helped him make friends. He was physically small and slim with a pale brown complexion, one of only a handful of non-white students at the local independent school he had attended. "They sometimes called me Paki", he told me casually, a passing comment as we spoke over lunch in his house. "They never meant it in a

racist way, though. They said it because they were friends with me. It made me feel good. It made me feel special". Initially, I was surprised that the racially loaded language that Ned received, not only didn't offend him, but made him feel 'good' and 'special'. Instead of perceiving their visible differences as factors that socially separated them from their white peers, both Jehan and Ned viewed these differences as things that facilitated friendships and strengthened their social relationships with others. Moreover, both individuals seemed to largely ignore their ethnic English heritage in their relationships with their friends. It appeared that acknowledging their visible ethnic differences to their white peers was significantly more successful in allowing them to become accepted and respected in their respective social groups.

Indeed, when speaking to mixed race individuals raised in Lewes, they almost unequivocally understood being different from the norm as a positive attribute. Two of them told me how they deliberately masked some aspects of their ethnic descent in favour of others to emphasise their uniqueness. Louis, a 23-year-old graduate of Sri Lankan, English and Irish descent told me this as we talked over his dining room table. Good-looking and popular at school, he said how he used to omit his English heritage when people asked, telling them he was 'Sri Lankan and Irish' because the combination seemed 'cooler' than acknowledging his English roots. "It also helps with girls" he smirked, claiming it "must be the luck of the Irish!". Annabelle similarly said how she played up her Fijian ancestry. "I feel bad for saying this", she said with a bashful smile, "but telling people I was half Fijian seemed cooler than saying I was half Indian. It made me feel more exotic".

Every person I spoke to had, at some time or another, actively chosen to emphasise his

or her divergence from the white norm in Lewes as a way to feel 'special', 'cool', 'exotic' or to have 'good banter'. Furthermore, some had deliberately omitted telling people about other aspects of their mixed race identities that they considered more common and less interesting. One the one hand, this demonstrates the inherently fluid identities of mixed race individuals, choosing to highlight and emphasise some aspects of their ethnic heritage over others to establish their perceived uniqueness. On the other hand, this is also reflective of a social environment in which this uniqueness and visible difference from the white majority is valued as a largely positive thing.

These findings at first appear to contradict traditional social identity theory. This theory suggests that, when categorised, people 'strongly favour their own groups' leading to social segregation and competition (Hogg 2016). Indeed, even before the development of this theory, early 20th century social scientists like Everett Stonequist applied a similar analysis to mixed race individuals. Stonequist argued that, as mixed race people defied obvious racial categories, they were excluded and removed 'from a system of group relations' and forced into the margins of society, 'poised in psychological uncertainty' (Stonequist 1935: 8). Taking Stonequist's perspective, it would be natural to assume that mixed race people in Lewes would be ostracised and isolated from the white majority 'group' due to their position 'between two social worlds' (Stonequist 1935: 8). From speaking to mixed race people in Lewes, however, this sense of 'uncertainty' was conspicuously absent. Instead of being excluded from social relations, they were able to use their mixed race identities to build and facilitate these relations while simultaneously celebrating their unique heritages.

I believe the reason Stonequist's arguments

proved so inaccurate in my fieldwork is due to the fact he ignored how cultural identities can be more important than racial or ethnic identities in determining social classifications. As previously mentioned, everyone I interviewed told me they felt 'culturally English'. Louis summarised this view articulately when I spoke to him. "Culture overrides race", he asserted. "I get much more stick from my friends saying I'm posh than I do for being brown."

Perhaps if the mixed race people I spoke to had been sufficiently culturally different from their peers then they may have been removed 'from a system of social relations' (Stonequist 1935: 8). However, this was not the case, they lived in the same neighbourhoods as Lewes' white majority, were educated in the same institutions, spoke English in the same accent and wore similar clothes. They were from affluent backgrounds in an affluent town. These cultural similarities to the white majority may have acted as a social medium that prevented a crude classification of them as inherently different. Far from being 'poised in psychological uncertainty', the mixed race people I spoke to had a sense of certainty in the common class and culture they shared with the majority of their peers. (Stonequist 1935: 8). This may have contributed to the sense of confidence they expressed to emphasise their ethnic differences in their social interactions. However ethnically different they may have been, their shared culture with the white majority of Lewes ensured that they would not be socially excluded, instead being seen as 'cool', 'special' and 'exotic'.

In this way, the findings of my fieldwork may not contradict traditional social identity theory at all. Conceptualising culture, not race, to be the main social factor that categorises people in Lewes indicates that mixed race people sharing the dominant culture of the town are considered a part

of the 'same group' as the white majority (Hogg 2016). Reconsidering the nature of social categorisation may help explain how mixed race people in Lewes perceived their ethnic differences to be traits that made them 'cool' but not separate, simultaneously highlighting the importance of culture and class in informing how people perceive themselves and others in society.

### **'Are you sure you want to wear that?' – Expression and Conformity in Lewes**

As previously outlined, the culture and class that the mixed race people I spoke to seemed to share with the white majority of Lewes acted as a social medium, ensuring that they could stand out while still being largely accepted and respected in Lewes. However, when their social relations were not perceived to be grounded in a common culture, this acceptance and respect suddenly disappeared. Without the social medium of common culture, the sense of heightened visibility that every person I interviewed had experienced was transformed from something positive into something far more sinister.

Ned recounted a particularly unpleasant experience from the summer before, as we finished our spaghetti in his large suburban house. He recalled an unusually hot day in which he had decided to buy a large box of ice creams in the supermarket to take to Brighton beach to sell. As the sun was strong and he had no hat, he decided to wear a keffiyeh he had in his house, a Middle-Eastern scarf that covers the head and shoulders. Walking back from the local supermarket, holding an icebox and wearing this head covering, he was approached by a (white) middle-aged man he did not know. "He was on the other side of the street and walked over to me", said Ned. "I could tell he looked angry...I think he must have been drunk or something.

Then he just started shouting at me. He was yelling ‘take that fucking headdress off’. I felt so visible...it was genuinely scary”. Although Ned remained composed, he recalled the feelings he experienced with clarity, as if this incident happened just the day before. Clearly, the experience had had a lasting effect on him. What struck me most was the notably different feelings that Ned’s visibility as a mixed race young man in Lewes had incurred in different contexts. The visible differences that made Ned feel ‘special’ in school had turned into something that made him feel vulnerable and scared. Instead of using his visibility being mixed race to strengthen his social relations with his white peers, this incident showed how his ethnic differences from the white norm in Lewes could also be a source of aggression and alienation.

Jehan recounted similar feelings when he decided to grow a beard. “My mum really wanted me to shave it” he said. “I quite liked the beard, but she was worried people would think I was a terrorist. Looking back, I do think people looked at me more suspiciously here when I had it.” I asked Jehan how he experienced this sense of increased suspicion. “Well, shop-keepers would keep their eye on you and people wouldn’t smile at you on the street. It’s only small things but you do notice them. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, but you really start to feel it after a while, you know?”. At the time I spoke to Jehan, he was clean-shaven.

These incidents, of course, cannot be removed from the broader political context of international Islamist terrorism and growing levels of Islamophobia in the Global North. Clearly, being perceived as Muslim (and the Islamophobic attitudes that accompany this perception) was something that made both Ned and Jehan feel vulnerable and marginalised. However, these instances also demonstrate the effect

of culture or perceived culture on the way that mixed race individuals are understood in society. At school, Ned and Jehan were understood to be a part of the same class and culture as most of their white peers, feeling ‘culturally English’ and sharing elements of this common social identity. On the street or in shops, this shared identity was obscured. There was no common uniform or common institution to attend. There were no vocal interactions for either Ned or Jehan to demonstrate their ‘English’ accents. Instead, Ned and Jehan were perceived to belong to a different culture, wearing garments and growing facial hair that immediately seemed to distance them from the dominant ‘English’ culture of Lewes. Without the social medium of a shared culture being obvious, the visibility of being mixed race no longer made Ned or Jehan feel ‘special’ or facilitated ‘good banter’. Instead, it was a source of suspicion, social marginalisation and aggression.

I believe that the experiences of Ned and Jehan show urban spaces to be social environments that have the capacity to influence the behaviour of individuals living within them. Lewis Mumford wrote in his studies of the city that urban spaces offered ‘the widest possible freedom and diversity [yet] a drastic system of compulsion and regimentation’ (1966: 67). Although Lewes is not a large city, Mumford’s understanding of urban space is highly relevant to it, particularly in regard to the ways in which mixed race individuals navigate this environment. As long as mixed race individuals are seen to be a part of the dominant ‘English’ culture of the town, they have infinite ‘freedom’ to express and celebrate their ethnic differences, allowing them to feel ‘cool’, ‘special’ or ‘exotic’ and to help them gain social respect from others. However, the social environment of Lewes has cultural boundaries that do indeed “regiment” the type and extent of this expression. The moment that mixed race

people are no longer perceived to belong to the dominant 'English' culture of this environment, their freedom of expression is constrained by the judgement and suspicion of others. Using Mumford's analysis of urban spaces, it becomes clear how a town like Lewes can simultaneously uphold 'the widest possible freedom and diversity' alongside 'a drastic system of compulsion and regimentation' using culture as a social medium to facilitate both (1966: 67). The experiences of Ned and Jehan highlight the freedom and constraints embedded in Lewes' society, showing how celebrations of difference are limited within the social confines of cultural conformity.

### Conclusions

During the course of my fieldwork, a complex picture emerged of the relationships of young mixed race people and the social environment of Lewes in which they lived. Far from seeing their unique ethnic heritage and visible differences from the white majority of the town as something which excluded them from bonding with others, they viewed these differences as overwhelmingly positive. Being mixed race allowed them to build social relations with others and gain respect and recognition, being seen as 'cool', 'special' and 'exotic'. However, this celebration of difference only extended to when they were understood to share a common culture with their white peers. When this common culture was obscured, the visible differences of mixed race people to the white majority in Lewes shifted from being something that facilitated positive interactions and respect to a source of exclusion, suspicion and even aggression.

The experiences of the people I interviewed demonstrate the importance of culture as a social medium, thus shedding light on anthropological literature on mixed race identities. Early scholars like Stonequist

focused on how race classifies 'social worlds' while ignoring the profound effect of culture in this classification (Stonequist 1935: 8). By reinterpreting culture as the medium that shapes and categorises social groups, a more nuanced and complex understanding of mixed race identities and social environments may be understood to emerge. Furthermore, by appreciating the importance of culture as a social medium, the work of Lewis Mumford can be expanded, providing important insights as to the relationship between mixed race individuals and the urban environment. Lewes is shown to be a cultural space that offers mixed race people 'the widest possible freedom' to express themselves when considered a part of the dominant culture but does indeed impose "a drastic system [of] regimentation" onto them when they are seen to stray from it (Mumford 1966: 60).

Though limited in its scope, talking to mixed race people in Lewes allowed me to gain valuable insights on the intersections between race, culture, class, place and identity. Lewes offers a unique cultural and social space for mixed race people to understand their own identities while simultaneously placing them in a strong position to understand the various freedoms and limitations of this social environment.

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